

Sophomore Success: How Faculty and Staff Can Help Students

“Her focus was diffuse. Her motivation for why she was there seemed unclear. She felt rudderless.” (J.J. Abrams, 2000)

This quote from a popular television show characterizes many college sophomores. They often lack focus, are unmotivated, and find themselves “drifting” through their second year of college without clear direction. A significant amount of research and attention has been paid to challenges faced by freshmen in higher education, while only recently focusing on these “middle children” of academia: sophomores.

It is these students who seem most likely to be uncommitted to their academic endeavors and disengaged in the fabric of college life. This “sophomore slump” can also be characterized by a lack of meaningful relationships with faculty, staff, or mentors. As faculty and staff, there are a number of strategies for redirecting these students and, thus, in helping each succeed in their sophomore year and in their overall college experience.

Learning through Service

While addressing different learning styles helps students succeed in the classroom, integrating activities that allow students to apply learning in a real-world context helps them to engage in their curriculum. Incorporating a service component into the classroom helps students engage by illustrating or elaborating on theoretical constructs. Service learning is particularly useful for sophomores who may not have enough experience to be involved in career-related employment. Internships are particularly appropriate for sophomores in providing an out-of-class experience, as well as a reflective session emphasizing the connection between theory and application.

Connections and Commitment

Although some students are able to easily make connections on campus without much effort, others struggle. This is particularly true for sophomores who may feel confused about future goals and uncertain about how their academic work relates to their future goals. These students may become anxious, frustrated and overly cautious about academic and career related decisions. Sophomores will benefit from activities which allow them to focus on values clarification and purpose. Faculty and staff can help students make the connections between academic endeavors and career interests. Additionally, helping a student identify critical skills and competencies can also help them make the connection between what they are doing in the classroom and how it might help them in the future.

Relationships

One of the key developmental milestones typically reached in the sophomore year is finding a sense of purpose. In order to achieve this, students must have positive, successful, and intellectually engaging academic experiences. Additionally, they need access to faculty and other advising resources to help them begin building the bridge between their coursework to major, career, and life goals. Therefore, opportunities for faculty-student mentoring relationships outside of the classroom can help redirect drifting sophomores. Furthermore, relationships outside of the classroom are crucial for the sophomore to become interwoven into the fabric of the campus community. Encouraging students to become involved in extracurricular activities will help them find an identity within the college community.

Faculty and staff can play a key role in helping sophomores succeed by helping them integrate into the college community; appreciating differences in learning styles, providing opportunities for applied learning, helping them make career connections, defining academic purpose, and encouraging broader involvement in the community. Ideally, this should be a collective effort by students, parents, and educators to help students engage in their college experience. If there is a student who appears to be struggling with the sophomore slump and you are concerned about them, you can refer them for free and confidential personal counseling. Counselors are also available for consultation with faculty and staff about student concerns.